

New disease may be serious health threat

April 4, 1983

USA Today

By Henry A. Waxman

WASHINGTON - A new disease is creating a crisis in medicine, government and a growing number of lives.

AIDS destroys the body's natural defenses, leaving the victim vulnerable to rare infections and cancers. No other disease has ever acted this way, taking away immunity and leaving the body defenseless against other infections. Most patients die within two years.

Although little is known about AIDS now, research on it might also lead to a cure for cancer. But despite the high death toll and the potential to tell us information to battle other diseases, the Reagan administration has failed to mount the national effort required.

In April of last year, there were 300 cases of AIDS. As of last week, more than 1200 had been reported. The number of new cases has doubled every six months.

One public health official has called it the most serious new epidemic since polio. Another says since smallpox.

The response to AIDS has been mixed and reluctant. Because the disease first was identified among homosexual men, the media have called it a "gay plague," or sometimes a "peril." But the media have not issued appeals for help.

And since the victims of the new disease may not belong to the Chamber of Commerce, the Reagan administration has treated AIDS as business as usual. This disease is definitely not business as usual. It has the potential of becoming the most serious public health threat of the century. It may also produce the best research on how the body fights disease and how medicine can help it win.

AIDS has appeared in other groups besides gay men. At its present rate, there will be 5,000 cases next year, and 20,000 in two years.

If researchers can find out how AIDS turns off the immune system, maybe they can find out what would turn it on in other diseases.

But instead of helping, the Reagan administration has cut research funding. In 1982, the agency that tracks outbreaks of diseases was cut by 20 percent. And for 1984, the president proposes to cut new medical research grants by one-fourth.

So although AIDS has become a major research issue, federal agencies cannot do major research. When the choice is epidemic or cure, we cannot afford to wait. The costs to the nation are doubling every six months.